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SUBJECT: SISYPHUS ON THE HILL: THE OPPOSITION PARTIES OF
EGYPT

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Classified By: DCM Stuart Jones, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Officially, there are 23 opposition parties registered in Egypt. Most of these are either one-man operations with no meaningful support, or government-controlled showpieces unrecognizable as "opposition" (one opposition candidate endorsed President Hosni Mubarak in the 2005 presidential elections rather than urging Egyptians to vote for him). The handful of credible Egyptian opposition parties face an uphill battle on many fronts - the steep hurdles created by government interference, a lack of defining party ideologies, paralyzing leadership squabbles, and a largely disinterested Egyptian public. Absent an unlikely halt to the government's targeted degradation, coupled with an effective approach by the parties themselves, the status quo of a stark bipolar Egyptian political landscape - the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) or the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) - is likely to remain unchanged. Given the scope of the opposition's troubles, there is little cause for hope that under the Mubarak government these parties will expand their popular base. End summary.

TWENTY-THREE PARTIES, BUT NOT MUCH COMPETITION

[1](#)2. (C) For the most part, Egypt's 23 opposition parties are controlled and co-opted by the government. There are five parties that more closely approximate an opposition in the traditional sense of the word - the Wafd party, the Taggamu party, the Democratic National Front, the Arab Democratic Nasserist party, and the Ghad party. Even they, however, are weakened by constant government meddling, manifested by the intimidation of party members, bureaucratic hurdles to normal party activities, threatening monitoring of activities, and sometimes the state's encouragement of crippling leadership disputes within the parties. These parties also face a formidable arsenal of state-controlled press arrayed against them. Their smaller-circulation newspapers and public relations efforts cannot compete. The government's intervention in electoral contests, from blocking opposition party candidates from registering to stuffing ballot boxes on election day, further undercuts any momentum that an opposition party may gain.

[1](#)3. (C) While the Egyptian government is arguably the main obstacle to political party development, the party leaders themselves are a close second. Petty jealousies and disputes have, at some point over the past two years, incapacitated all five of the credible opposition parties. None of the

leaders are dynamic or charismatic. Additionally, the parties, despite numerous attempts, have been unable to sustain effective cross-party alliances. Opposition parties also face an uphill climb in recruitment, because they cannot offer the patronage that fuels much of Egyptian politics. As one thirty-something Egyptian told us, "Why would a politically ambitious young person join one of the opposition parties? They have no chance of success there. Instead, they join the NDP - that's where the advancement and the opportunities are." Recruitment among more seasoned Egyptian political types is also difficult. A former minister (under Sadat) who briefly joined an opposition party before leaving in disgust commented to us, "As long as the NDP and its government continue to shut the doors on political reform, what is the benefit of taking part in political life? Why waste my time, when I know I will not be allowed to achieve anything?"

14. (C) Another challenge for Egypt's five active opposition parties, who run the gamut from socialist to liberal, is the increasing popular resonance of faith-based appeals. The highly-organized "banned but tolerated" Muslim Brotherhood (MB) seems to have much more traction with Egyptians than any of the legal opposition parties. This is in part due to its outreach through the provision of social services, and because it ironically can operate more easily than its liberal counterparts, not being subject to restrictions on political parties, but also because the Egyptian populace appears to respond more enthusiastically to the MB's religiously-oriented approach than they do to that of the more secular parties. Opposition seats in Egypt's People's Assembly are a clear demonstration of this disparity. While

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the 2005 parliamentary elections were marred by fraud and violence, the MB still managed to win 88 parliamentary seats. The combined total for all the legal opposition parties was a paltry 9 seats (6 from Wafd, 2 from Tagammu, and 1 from Tagammu). Due to the subsequent departure of one MP each from the Wafd and Taggamu parties respectively, there are currently only 7 sitting parliamentarians from legal opposition parties. (Note: 2 other opposition MP's hail from the unlicensed Karama party. The People's Assembly consists of a total of 454 seats. End note).

ANATOMY OF EGYPT'S WEAK OPPOSITION

Al Wafd

15. (C) The faded grand dame of Egypt's opposition scene, the liberal Wafd ("Delegation") party, was formed in 1919 on a platform of opposition to the British presence in Egypt, and Egypt's beloved first prime minister Saad Zaghlul hailed from its ranks. The Wafd's more recent history has been far less glorious, with internal leadership struggles seriously damaging its effectiveness, and marginalizing its appeal. In 2006, a dispute over the presidency of the party resulted in an armed take-over of party headquarters, with 23 people wounded (ref A). While Mahmoud Abaza is now the recognized head of the party, his rival Noman Goma'a continues to fight for the presidency in the courts, leading to frequent headlines about Wafd's internecine battles.

16. (C) Despite these troubles, several senior Wafd officials tell us that the party is trying to "rebuild" to its popular status of decades past, but faces immobilizing governmental restraints. In accordance with Egyptian law, in order to hold a large-scale meeting, or even a small demonstration, the party is required to get permissions from the State Security Investigative Services (SSIS). A recent membership drive in the provinces was allegedly stymied by the intervention of SSIS officials, who warned the families of young recruits with stories of the potential consequences of

joining the Wafd. According to our Wafd contacts, many new members withdrew from the party, and the recruitment effort flopped. Wafd's membership is estimated at between 10,000-100,000 nationwide (Note: The NDP claims a national membership of over 2 million. Egypt's population is approximately 78 million. End note). Wafd officials also complain about documents regularly disappearing from party headquarters, and recurring government efforts to "instruct us" on what position to take on various hot-button issues. Wafd officials are willing to participate in USG-funded training initiatives, but only if they have the cover of the NDP also participating.

Al Ghad

¶17. (C) The experience of the liberal Ghad ("Tomorrow") party, licensed in 2004, provides the most vivid example of government intervention in the affairs of an opposition party. After almost two years of legal wrangling, in December 2007 the Cairo Court of Appeals ruled that the pro-Ayman Nour leadership of the Ghad party be overturned, in favor of GOE-backed leader Moussa Mustafa Moussa (refs C and D). The party is now split into two wings, with competing central offices only two blocks away from each other in central Cairo. Moussa is legally the leader of the Ghad party, and, once one final court case is decided, will likely have the right to take over the downtown headquarters that Ayman Nour once worked out of. Poloff has witnessed on numerous occasions the Ayman Nour wing of the party trying to hold a meeting or protest at its headquarters. On such occasions, hundreds of riot police line the streets outside the party's office, requiring attendees to walk an intimidating gauntlet of batons and hissing masked police. One former senior Ghad leader told us about the efforts of SSIS officers to get him to leave the party when he first joined four years ago: "They would call me at all hours of the day and night, advising me to reconsider my decision to join the party, 'for the good of my family, for my children.' After 6-8 months they stopped calling, but it was certainly a difficult period for me." Neither branch of Al Ghad's leadership currently supports participation in any USG-funded party training, although some people who identified themselves as lower-ranking Ghad party members have taken part in International Republican Institute (IRI) training sessions.

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Democratic Front

¶18. (C) The liberal Democratic Front Party, the newest addition to the party scene, was registered in 2007. Osama Al Ghazali Harb, the president and founder of the party told us, "it is very difficult to build a party in this hostile environment. It is not impossible. But it is very, very difficult." Aside from a struggle for the leadership of the party that made headlines for the past several months, and was recently resolved in Harb's favor, Harb complained that "the most important thing for us to build the party is fundraising, and businessmen hesitate." He recounted that some potential donors were approached by SSIS or high-level GOE officials and advised that "things would not go well for their business" should they decide to donate to the DFP. "So, they don't, which is crippling the party, as we have difficulty raising money to pay rent for our headquarters."

¶19. (C) To illustrate the challenges of being an opposition party, Harb told us about his experience trying to organize a DFP-sponsored conference several months ago on the rising price of wheat, which he saw as part of the party's effort to reach out to a rural constituency. It took him a month to find a venue for the conference - he tried the Mubarak Public Library and other government-affiliated venues, but as soon as he revealed the event would be held under the auspices of

an opposition party, he was told he was not welcome. Harb then tried to book a hotel, but each hotel he contacted failed to get the required approval from SSIS needed in order to host such an event. Finally, the DFP held the conference in a small, shabby private theater. Harb told us that each party has an SSIS officer assigned to it, to track the group's activities. Harb has a "warm" relationship with DFP's SSIS liaison, and personally calls him to inform him about upcoming activities: "it is easier that way." The DFP, whose membership it's leaders estimate at 4,000-5,000, is willing to participate in USG-funded political party training.

Al Tagammu

¶10. (C) The socialist Tagammu ("Unionist") party, was in 1977, when then President Anwar Sadat called for a multi-party system, and new parties were instantly created. Over the years, Tagammu has had recurring leadership disputes, the most recent of them centering around the continued chairing of the party by current aged leader Rifaat El Said. Said, who has a widespread reputation of being eager to cooperate with the GOE, told us that the party often has problems getting permits to hold large meetings, even at its own headquarters. He also said the Tagammu headquarters is regularly broken into by SSIS, "just so they can see what is going on." He mentioned that some young members of the party sometimes insist on sleeping in the central party office, in order to foil, or at least uncover such infiltrations but that overall "it is just a fact of life for us." Said noted that he shares everything regarding new party initiatives with SSIS: "it is not worth the trouble to do otherwise." Tagammu leaders estimate its membership at 45,000, although party outsiders say it does not exceed 3,000. The party refuses to participate in any USG-funded training initiatives, although a few low-ranking party members have reportedly participated in IRI training.

Arab Democratic Nasserists

¶11. (C) The nationalist Arab Democratic Nasserist party, licensed in 1992, has also suffered from ongoing disputes over party leadership positions. The "Reform and Change" bloc has filed lawsuits against the group's current leaders, contesting April 2007 internal elections results. The Nasserist party leadership prefers not to engage with the U.S. embassy "on principle," but one senior official who meets privately with us regaled us with tales of the "invisible hands" of SSIS stirring up trouble within the party. It is difficult to gauge whether SSIS is indeed responsible for the party's disunity, or if the weak and vulnerable party leadership simply is incapable of maintaining discipline within its ranks. The senior party official told us party membership does not exceed 3,000, "and even that is optimistic." The Nasserist party refuses to participate in any USG-funded training initiatives, although some low-ranking party members have reportedly participated in IRI training, without higher-level approval.

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THE VIEW FROM THE NDP

¶12. (C) Senior ruling party interlocutors routinely disparage the weak opposition, lamenting that no stronger parties exist (refs B and E). In a recent meeting with Gamal Mubarak advisor and NDP Secretary for Political Education Mohamed Kamal, he largely dismissed the "exaggerations" of opposition parties. "What they say about government interference is not really correct," he said. "We are not perfect, but once a party is registered, there are no legal barriers to their participation." Kamal posited that the current dismal

opposition situation in Egypt is "simply the legacy of decades of a single-party system." He opined that it will take some time for "real" opposition parties to develop. "There is a clear understanding within the ruling party that more active opposition parties are necessary," he averred, and did not respond to poloffs observation that stringent security procedures etc. would make a casual observer think just the opposite. "Our desire to encourage stronger opposition parties is one of the main reasons we are considering future new electoral legislation that would move to a proportional representation system - such a system would force parties to gain support." Kamal also mused that "a big part of the problem here is that, rather than being centered around a party, politics are largely focused on the individual - old influential families, businessmen who contribute to local constituencies - that's why independents do so well."

COMMENT

¶13. (C) While the Mubarak regime itself is the main driver in creating the stark bipolar political landscape of the MB versus the ruling NDP, Egypt's politically immature opposition parties do little themselves to fill the gap. The across-the-board lack of dynamic party leadership, combined with a negligible ability to develop party bases outside of Cairo (or in some cases, even within Cairo itself), and no concrete platforms that tangibly develop an alternative vision to that of the NDP or MB, result in a de-facto one-party system in Egypt. Absent an unlikely halt to the government's targeted degradation of credible opposition parties, coupled with an effective approach by the parties themselves, the unsatisfactory status quo is likely to remain unchanged.

SCOBAY